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Martin L. Kretzmann

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CONFESSIONAL CHURCH TODAY?

Martin L. Kretzmann

It should be said at the outset that my approach to this question is influenced greatly by the experiences I have had in the overseas work of the Church. My wife and I served for thirty-three years. The first eighteen years were spent in evangelistic work among Hindus and Muslims and in pastoral care of several small village churches. The last fifteen years were in service at the Lutheran seminary in Nagercoil where I taught a variety of subjects with special concentration on dogmatics, world religions and Old Testament. One of my extra-curricular assignments was the preparation (with the aid of able Tamil scholars) of a new translation of the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century in the Tamil language. The years of service in India gave me the opportunity to have contacts with missionaries of many denominations, to have discussions on theological and missiological matters and to pray with them for the spread of God's kingdom. I participated in the theological retreats of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India and in the ten-year discussions with the Church of South India.

In 1963 I was recalled to the United States to make a study of the mission program of the Missouri Synod, the result of which was reported to the 1965 convention of the synod. I then joined the missions staff of the synod as secretary for studies, planning and research to implement the recommendations of the report. From 1964 until my retirement in 1974 I also served the Lutheran World Federation as a study consultant on a half-time basis. This gave me the opportunity to participate in many meetings of the LWF and of the World Council of Churches in most of the countries where major mission programs of western churches were being carried on. For several years my special assignment was to examine programs for theological education in Africa and Asia. I also worked with the committee on the Church and the Jewish People and, in general, in the area of Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths. As the LWF staff consultant I attended the "Consultation on Church Union Negotiations" conducted by the WCC at Bossey, April 9-15, 1967.

This sketch of my life should help you understand my view, i.e., although one can deal with the Lutheran dimension of church unity and union, the larger

question of church union must also be in our thinking.

I propose to get at the question, "What does it Mean to be a Confessional Church Today?" by taking each of the last three words separately and ask:

What does it Mean to be a *Confessional* Church Today?

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A **CONFESSIONAL** CHURCH TODAY?

In ecumenical gatherings it is not unusual to get the impression from non-Lutheran speakers that being "confessional" is the exclusive, private vice of the Lutheran Church; Lutherans are often criticized for holding strongly to the Confessions. The fact is that all mainline Christian churches, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist or Methodist, hold to definite standards of faith when they come in contact with churches of other persuasion. There may be a difference in the degree with which other churches use and quote their standards of faith in contrast to Lutherans but the discussions always demonstrate that non-Lutherans also come out of a particular tradition and interpret the subject under discussion from a particular viewpoint.

As Vilmos Vajta said, "Every church is characterized by loyalty to a confession which determines its appearance in the world and forms the actual principle of its existence. This confession may be transmitted from generation to generation orally, in writing, or through ritual. Each church confesses Christ in the manner of its proclamation and in the method in which it administers the sacraments and above all in its total expression of life, the way in which it carries out its call to be servants of Christ in this world. Its 'confession' appears in each church at the point where its ministry begins to function."¹

Vajta pointed out that the confession of a church may be kerygmatic, ritualistic, dogmatic, or activist, but whichever type it is, it is that which the church will not give up in its relation to other churches, even though it may agree to new ways of expressing its confession.

It is interesting to note that there is a significant difference in the way in which churches approach this matter of the confession. For the most part the Lutheran Church will ask, first and foremost, about the nature of a church's confession, whereas most other Protestant churches will ask about questions of order, liturgy, church law and the like.

In an interesting statement on "Confessionalism" in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Hans Weissgerber points out that when several confessional churches meet it is quite common that each will claim that it has "not only the correct confession, but the only, exclusively correct confession, the only valid and binding confession." He calls this confessionalism, which is not that the church is faithful

1. Vilmos Vajta, "The Confession of the Church as an Ecumenical Concern," *The Church and the Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 163f.

to its confession, but that there is an exclusive attitude toward the confession and particular character of other churches, coupled with the notion that its own confession is absolutely and unchangeably correct. Such an attitude implies that the Holy Spirit does not work in those churches.²

In September 1957 a conference on "The Nature of the Unity we Seek" was held at Oberlin, Ohio at which Paul Bretscher of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, presented a statement on confessions. He makes eleven thetical statements, some of which are relevant to this discussion. After pointing out that making a confession is Scriptural (Matt. 10:32 — confessing Christ before men), and confessions in the history of the church had their origin both in the activity of the church and in meeting heterodox views, he said,

3. Confessions are the voice of orthodoxy speaking in a given period in the history of the church. They, therefore, always reflect in some degree the peculiar historical, sociological, and philosophic framework of thought current in that period. Nevertheless, the fact that the church of later days recognized the theological value of confessions made in early periods of the church's history means that confessions have more than immediate and existential significance. Nor are they mere landmarks in the history of the Church's growth and development. They are, rather, next to Scripture, the most significant factor which determined the faith of later generations of Christians. To understand the history of the Christian Church and its dogma one must, first of all, acquaint oneself with her confessions.
4. Confessions are *confessions*; no more and no less. They are not divinely inspired like the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. They are *witnesses* to the faith once delivered to the saints. Their theology is the product of intensive study of the Scripture and of the firm belief that Scripture alone can decide the issues arising between orthodox and heterodox views.

After emphasizing that confessions are not Scripture and cannot displace it he adds,

5. . . . "If it could be demonstrated that confessions have violated the truth of Scripture in this or that point, such error(s) would have to be corrected." (An example of this is Melancthon's desire to revise Art. X, on the Lord's Supper.)

Bretscher noted that confessions can preserve the church from lapsing into forms of enthusiasm and can serve as a restraining influence against the entrance of unorthodox modes of thought into the Church and then concluded:

11. . . . Each generation of Christians owes it to itself and to the Church of Jesus Christ to relate its theological orientation as closely as possible to that discoverable in its historic creeds and confessions.³

Both Weissgerber and Bretscher make important points for our understanding of what it means to be confessional. As soon as we absolutize our confessions we negate the prior importance of the Scripture and its pre-eminence as the vehicle of God's revelation, as well as deny the on-going work of the Holy Spirit in the

2. Hans Weissgerber, "Confessionalism," *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Julius Bodensieck, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), pp. 567ff.

3. Manuscript in the possession of the writer.

Church. Such an attitude to the confessions effectively shuts off all further study of the Scriptures.

At its Minneapolis Assembly the LWF made the statement that "Listening obediently to the Scriptures, abiding in the apostolic tradition, and free to respond to the demands of our time, the Church trusts the Holy Spirit to guide her to confess her faith rightly and relevantly in continuity with her historic witness."⁴

To be sure, there is a distinctively "Lutheran" way of being "Confessional." F.E. Mayer stated that "The confessional principle of Lutheranism differs basically from that of the Reformed bodies. Lutheranism accepts its Confession as a joint and unanimous reply to God's message in the Scriptures and as the doctrinal norm and standard for its teachers and members." This basic difference between the Lutheran and Reformed confessional principles does not lie in variations in interpretation but in the fact that Lutherans are convinced that the Lutheran Confessions clearly state "the Gospel message, which assures the sin-burdened conscience of God's unmerited grace in Christ and correctly portrays the nature and function of the Christian's faith."⁵

It is important that we always remain mindful that Lutheranism was a reforming movement within the *una sancta*. Its purpose was to re-establish the evangelical substance of the faith and the normative authority of the Scriptures in matters of Christian faith and life. In the post-Reformation period, for historical reasons, there was a time of consolidation when Lutheranism became a recognized ecclesiastical system, an establishment over against similar establishments. One of the results of the effort to achieve a specific identity was to give the Confessions an authority sometimes rivalling that of the Scriptures.⁶

This type of "confessionalism" is found not only in churches which have historical confessional writings. It appears also in those churches which proclaim "no creed but the Bible" and results, in most cases, in the proclamation of a most peculiar and deviant Gospel.⁷ The Formula of Concord states, "We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged." "Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times."⁸

The distinctive characteristic of the Lutheran emphasis on the Scriptures can, of

4. *The Proceedings of the Third Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, August 15-25, 1957 ([Geneva]: The Lutheran World Federation, 1958), p. 88.

5. [Frederick] E. Mayer, *Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 140.

6. James A. Scherer has an excellent article, "The Identity Crisis in Contemporary Lutheranism" in *Context*, Journal of LSTC, Vol. 1, No. 1, in which he traces the post-Reformation developments and their effect on Lutheranism today.

7. George W. Forell, "Lutheranism in the Ecumenical Movement," plenary address at the Asia Lutheran Conference, Ranchi, India, 1964.

8. Formula of Concord, Epitome 1 in Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 464f.

course, only be understood in the light of Luther's manner of looking at the "*sola scriptura*" principle. Mayer describes this as follows: "In Luther's thinking the *sola scriptura* principle is exclusively Christocentric. The 'Scriptures alone' is the same as 'the Gospel alone,' and 'the Gospel alone' is Christ alone. The Christocentric approach to the Sacred Scriptures revolutionized Luther's entire theology . . . *Sola Scriptura* meant for Luther that God had spoken His absolution in the Scriptures, and thus the Scriptures had opened Paradise to him. Scripture alone is the Gospel alone."⁹

In a footnote to this section Mayer points out that Lutheranism, Calvinism and Romanism are all ardent advocates of a *sola scriptura* principle, but for basically different reasons. Romanism hears in the Scriptures the commandments of the God of Justice; Calvinism, the stern voice of the God of sovereignty; the Lutheran Church, the gracious voice of Christ.¹⁰

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CONFSSIONAL **CHURCH** TODAY?

In the context of our present discussion, we are talking about church in the sense of what is known now as a denomination. The phenomenon of denominations, however, is strange to the New Testament understanding of the Church. There one has only the local fellowship of Christians gathered around Word and Sacraments and, in the larger sense, the whole body of Christians whose head is Christ. The other use denotes all the Christians in a given city or area, who may have different centers in which to gather but are all one Church. The concern here is with our historical situation.

When one looks at the gathering of Christians in any given fellowship or congregation, the percentage of those who are members for so-called denominational reasons is, in truth, very small. People belong to a particular fellowship for a wide variety of reasons. Indeed, an honest opinion poll would show that very few people knew why they were Lutherans, for example, and not something else. Heritage, family influence, convenience, social and economic reasons would be the major reasons why people belong; very few people would be able to give a clear and definite statement of a specifically Lutheran understanding of their faith. In fact, it might be equally difficult to get such a statement regarding their adherence to the Christian faith in general, apart, perhaps, from a feeling of attachment to the person of Jesus Christ. The number of those who would be able to give an orthodox statement on the nature of the grace of God in Jesus Christ would likely be very small. Instead, we would probably find that most Christians believe they are saved by leading good lives or by being faithful in the observance of cultic rites and ceremonies.

The purpose of these comments is not to cast aspersions on the members of the Church but to point out that we have been able to come to terms with a type of pluralism, i.e., various kinds and levels of faith and understanding of what faith is

9. Mayer, pp. 128f.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

and means. Even though we know that this is the situation we are able, in a Lutheran fellowship, to call them all Lutherans. My contacts with people of other denominations convinces me that the situation is much the same there. In spite of this, we are correct when we look on all of them as Christians who have been brought into the circle of God's grace in Christ, with the exception, of course, of those who are deliberately and maliciously hypocritical in their profession of faith.

What does this say to us about our relations to people of denominations other than our own? It emphasizes the fact that the classical systems within the whole Christian fellowship have little to do with the thought forms of the individual believer. If one looks at western Protestantism in general, the two great objectives of the Reformation, i.e., the restoration of the Scriptures to a normative pre-eminence in faith and life, and the recovery of the evangelical nature of the Christian faith, have been accepted by all but a few branches of Christendom. In one sense or another the Bible has become the center of the Christian's life and all Christians believe that they are saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

Even though we have some doubts about the use of the term "church" in our question, we must use it for lack of something better. What does it mean, then, to be a Lutheran Church, bearing in mind that not all are Lutherans who belong to the Lutheran Church, and not all Lutherans are in the Lutheran Church? It is not an unimportant factor that all of us gathered here are Christians in the Lutheran tradition. This is not to imply that we have something which other Christians lack. That which has made us Christians is no more, and no less, than that which has made other persons so, namely, the grace of God in Christ which is offered to all in like measure and which is received in equal quantity and quality by the faith which the Holy Spirit creates. In this aspect of our being as Christians, and it alone is substantive, we are not different in any sense from any other group of Christians; the faith by which we are saved is the common faith of all the children of God, and that is neither weak nor strong, good or bad.

But there is a sense in which our being Christians in the Lutheran tradition is important. This lies in the fact that by the grace of God we are heirs to an understanding of the Gospel of the grace of God which will not permit us to add to or subtract from that Gospel anything which would diminish the glory of Christ, nor will it permit us to engage in any activity which would cause His glory to be directed to anyone or anything other than Himself. This is not, of course, to say that we have always done this to perfection. We have been unfaithful servants in this respect as in all others. Nor is it to imply that there are not other Christians to whom this understanding of the Gospel has also been granted and who are, therefore, "Lutherans" even though they stand outside the structure of the Lutheran Church. But it does affirm our faith that God has placed in the world such an understanding of the Gospel, even though it is in earthen vessels, and has called us to such a ministry of witness and confession to His pure grace that the glory may be His alone.

In recent years we have become accustomed to speak of Lutheranism as a movement within Christendom, rather than as a denomination. As a movement, Lutheranism's sole concern has been that the Gospel be proclaimed according to its true character, that men might know and believe that they are justified by grace through faith alone. In its better moments it has not been concerned with whether people

joined the Lutheran Church or not, except insofar as they would thus have opportunity to receive the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Membership in the Lutheran Church as such does not add anything to what God has already done in giving to the person of faith the power to become a child of God.

James Scherer had some plain words to say about this: "It is an unpleasant but undeniable fact that Lutheran identity today consists mostly of the cultivation of Lutheran *adiaphora*. We are identified by our red [now green] hymnal, our distinctive vestments, or prevailing liturgical uniformity, our standardized bulletins, our denominational parish education materials, our model constitutions, our centralized boards and commissions, our policies with regard to finance, organization, reporting, etc. So pervasive is our sense of Lutheran (usually a particular brand of Lutheran) identity at this level that we are apt to think that it is the main thing about churchmanship. We are, in short, most identifiably Lutheran precisely at the point where the reformers said there should be the greatest liberty. They taught that we are most properly Lutheran when we stand for the basic evangelical teachings. They believed that 'one holy church shall endure forever,' and that 'it is enough' to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments. If we took the confessions seriously we could not rest in a Lutheran identity that is mostly defined by its devotion to the *adiaphora*."¹¹

At this point we must look at another aspect of the Lutheran understanding of the nature of the Church, namely, that it is, in the truest sense, the Body of Christ which embraces all who accept Him in faith as Lord and Savior. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states: "Hypocrites and evil men are indeed associated with the true church as far as outward ceremonies are concerned. But when we come to define the church we must define that which is the living Body of Christ and the church in fact as well as in name. If we are to define the church as only the outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked, then men would not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit but would think of it only as the outward observance of certain devotions and rituals."¹²

Against those who charge that this kind of a church does not and cannot exist in the world, the Apology states: "We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments . . . Of course, there are also many weak people in it . . . but because they do not overthrow the foundation (i.e., the true knowledge of Christ and faith), these are forgiven them or even corrected."¹³

The Church as the Body of Christ can thus be described as follows:

1. The Body of Christ is composed of people who are attached to Christ as head because of His redeeming work and by means of the Gospel of that work.
2. The Body of Christ is composed of individuals who, through the redeeming

11. Scherer, pp. 39f.

12. Apology, Tappert, p. 170.

13. Ibid., p. 171.

work of Christ and His Word, are attached to one another in unity by love.

3. As members of the Body of Christ Christians are to employ their spiritual gifts toward each other for mutual edification and ultimate victory.
4. In the Body of Christ pastors and teachers fulfill their purpose as gifts of Christ to the Church, of equipping Christians for the ministry of mutual edification and reconciliation.
5. In the Body of Christ Christians share every structure of their lives for mutual edification through Word and Sacrament.

The important point to note in this description is that all those who have been made members of the Body by the redeeming work of Christ its Head must live in community with each other and that there must be a relation of communities of Christians to each other. I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 are the basis for the above statements.

The essential point of departure for a posture of confession must be our membership in the Body of Christ and, in the case of confession directed to other Christians, the recognition of them as fellow members of that Body. Our confession, then, is not a case of one party instructing another in the truth, but a process of mutual edification of the members of the one Body. Our essential unity with our fellow members in the Body of Christ is not the result of an organizational connection but of God's act in Christ. The purpose of our confession is not to extend the empirical church to which we belong but to fill up the Body of Christ so that all its members live in His fellowship.

Having said that, we remind ourselves that we do stand in the Lutheran tradition and ask what specific values are brought to our confession out of the Lutheran heritage. A helpful summary statement on this subject is found in a paper delivered by George Forell at the Asia Lutheran Conference in Ranchi, India in 1964. His topic was "Lutherans in the Ecumenical Movement."

The first value, Forell pointed out, is that Lutherans are committed to a theology of the Cross rather than a theology of glory. We must reject all absolute claims, "either for some conservative repristination of an original and perfect New Testament Church, or for some progressive, modern expression of 'demythologized' or 'secularized' Christianity . . . or even for some infallible *magisterium*, some inerrant teaching office, which can guarantee the theological perfection of Christian dogma and preserve the church in this world without 'wrinkle or spot.'"¹⁴

We are all familiar with the various facets of a theology of glory in our own day, glory in the purity of our doctrine, glory in the progressive character of our institutions, glory in our church growth over against other churches and in a host of other matters. When Luther attacked scholastic theology in his day it was a frontal assault "against the greatest and most persistent enemy of the Christian faith, the theology of glory. As long as Christians inside and outside of our Lutheran Churches are tempted by any theology of glory, be it fundamentalistic or modernistic, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Protestant version, it remains our responsibility to remind them and us of the theology of the cross."¹⁵

The Lutheran Confessions also remind us that Lutherans are committed to the

14. Forell, *ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

real presence of the true body and blood of Christ in the Supper of our Lord.¹⁶ The principle underlying this confession, i.e., that the finite is capable of being the vehicle of the infinite, is the key to the understanding of man, of the Church in the world, and of the Scripture. In each of these that which is present to the human eye is not that which the eye of faith can see. Man is both sinner and justified (*simul justus et peccator*). The Church in its empirical manifestation is not without spot or wrinkle and yet "it is the real, earthly, institutional church which God has chosen to use for the proclamation of His Word and the administration of the Sacraments."¹⁷ In the case of Scripture, there are those who proclaim a transubstantiation of the Word, which abolishes the humanity of Holy Scripture in favor of some docetic illusion. On the other hand, there are those who see in the Holy Scriptures only human documents of faith and deny all claims that Holy Scriptures confront men with the Word of God. Against both of these perversions the principle underlying the doctrine of the real presence emphasizes the truth that "in, with and under the very earthly human documents presented in very earthly and human language" the eternal Word confronts us.¹⁸

The third contribution which the Lutheran Confessions can make to the Church of God in our time is to remind us of the centrality of the distinction between law and Gospel for the Christian faith. The Formula of Concord states, "We believe, teach and confess that the distinction between law and Gospel is an especially glorious light that is to be maintained with great diligence in the church so that, according to St. Paul's admonition, the word of God may be divided rightly."¹⁹

This distinction is especially important when we seek to understand how the church is to react to social, political, or economic questions in society. The church cannot give Gospel answers to law questions. This distinction is a basic safeguard against the temptation to embrace any christocratic pretensions in our time. On the other hand, when the law is made into the Gospel, the entire Christian proclamation is perverted, and "the comforting and joyful message which does not terrify but confronts consciences that are frightened by the law, directs them solely to the merit of Christ and raises them up again by the delightful proclamation of God's grace and favour acquired through the merits of Christ"²⁰ is forgotten. It is our task in obedience to Christ to confess this central distinction of law and Gospel.

The final point in answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a Confessional Church Today?" must deal with the relation of doctrinal and confessional statements to the being of the Church. This was one of the first and most difficult questions which faced the representatives of the Lutheran churches in India and the representatives of the Church of South India. The Lutherans entered into the discussion with the conviction that the two churches would prepare a common confession which would be the basis for union. The Church of South India felt that its

16. Augsburg Confession, X, Tappert, p. 34; Formula of Concord, Epitome VIII, Tappert, pp. 481ff; Solid Declaration, VII, Tappert, pp. 568.

17. Forell, *ibid*.

18. *Ibid*.

19. Formula of Concord, Epitome, V, 2, Tappert, p. 478.

20. Formula of Concord, Epitome, V, 7, Tappert, p. 478.

acceptance of the ecumenical creeds was sufficient evidence of its Christian character and that further growth and agreement in doctrinal formulations would best come within the framework of a declared and practiced fellowship in union.

In preparation for the encounter with the Church of South India the Lutherans had held a series of theological retreats and prepared a statement of the Lutheran faith as it pertained to the Indian context. This was presented in 1950 to the Church of South India, which was asked if it would take this statement as fairly corresponding to its doctrinal position. The Church of South India studied the document and said that "while gladly recognizing the document as an expression of the faith they held, it could not be accepted as containing the fulness of the revelation given in the Bible."²¹ The Lutherans replied to this that "their purpose in wanting a doctrinal statement was not for the inclusion of a 'legally binding statement' in the constitution, but only to discover the extent of doctrinal agreement between the Churches. They maintained that no Church Union should be attempted without prior achievement of doctrinal unity. The members of the Church of South India, on the other hand, took the stance that it would be unwise to commit the Church to a detailed doctrinal statement conditioned by certain limited, perhaps Western, presuppositions. They maintained that unity was to be sought in the totality of the Church's witness to the Gospel. After some discussion, however, both groups agreed that it was necessary for the Churches to have sufficient understanding of each other's doctrinal teaching before proceeding towards unity."²²

This historical material has been quoted at some length because it is not generally available in the West and because it is an illustration of how a church tried to be faithful to its obligation to be a Confessing Church.

The result of the above discussion was that it was felt necessary for the two groups to prepare a statement on "The Relation of Doctrinal and Confessional Statements to the Being of the Church." The statement consisted of ten thetical paragraphs which attempted to strike a balance, or perhaps more correctly, maintain the tension between the importance of knowing and confessing the truth and of recognizing faith as an inner experience. After describing God's self-revelatory acts, especially in Jesus Christ, and noting the limitations of human language to express the fulness of that revelation, the statement said:

5. The use of creeds and confessions to guide Christians into deeper experience and to preserve the essentials of the Christian message is, in principle, sound and scriptural.
6. All creeds and confessions are subordinate standards subject to the authority of the Word of God.

After several paragraphs on the Word of God, the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, and the value of the ancient creeds of the church, the final paragraph stated:

10. Agreement regarding the basic doctrines which are of the essence of the Gospel is the pre-requisite of union between the Churches, Nevertheless the basis for the unity of the Church is oneness in the Lord Himself. The responsibility for deciding in any particular case whether the necessary doctrinal

21. *Agreed Statements* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1960), p. 3.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

agreement exists rests upon the living Church as led by the Holy Spirit.²³

James Scherer pointed out the "antiphonal character" of this statement. "An effort," he said, "is made to reconcile different presuppositions regarding the place of the confessions in the church with no sacrifice of intensity on either side. That such an ecumenical task can be attempted at all must be attributed to a common belief in the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit."²⁴ Vajta found it "interesting that the Lutherans in southern India have gained the approval of the Church of South India to the thesis that agreement regarding the basic doctrines which are of the essence of the gospel is the prerequisite of union."²⁵

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CONFESSIONAL CHURCH TODAY?

The point here, of course, is that we are called to confess our faith in the particular circumstances and age into which God has placed us, which is neither the Mediterranean world of the first century, nor the medieval world of the 16th century but a world which confronts us daily with radical and far-reaching changes in the understanding of man's relationships to the world and the universe, as well as to the neighbor next door.

One of the characteristics of our world today, particularly in western countries, is that the community of Christ's disciples is surrounded on all sides by people who do not live in the world with a "Godward" side to their existence. I prefer that expression to such terms as "secularistic" or "materialistic." It emphasizes the importance of a whole life style rather than an institutional ecclesiastical orientation.

This means that our confession today must be directed to those who are not in the Body of Christ. In a beautiful statement on this Mayer says, "The Lutherans consider the Confessions not only a doctrinal standard; they are more than a body of truth; they become a public confession, a confessional act. They are, in the first place, the believer's joyful response to God's gracious act in the Gospel. The Lutheran Confessions are kerygmatic and prayable, i.e., they belong in the pulpit and the pew. They are a doxology."²⁶

"As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." The church was sent into the world to do nothing less than carry on the work and ministry of its Lord. To belong to the church means to be part of the mission of Christ. Just as our Lord proclaimed the Kingdom of God in the thought forms and within the culture of His day, so we are called to shape our confession in such a way that the person of the twentieth century can understand what we are saying. To do this we must be prepared for the hard work of re-examining again and again the historical confessions of the Church

23. Ibid., pp. 12f.

24. James A. Scherer, "The Confessions in the Younger Churches with particular reference to Christian unity in Asia," *The Church and the Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 159.

25. Vajta, p. 178.

26. Mayer, p. 140.

so that we understand them in their context and learn how the church proclaimed the Gospel so that it was significant to the people of their time. We all know that there is no value in giving yesterday's answers to today's questions; or, worse still, giving answers to questions that no one is asking.

The other dimension of being a Confessional Church *Today* lies in the area of our relationships with other branches of the empirical church, i.e., our confession within Christendom. In this area one must attempt to keep a proper balance, or tension, between the geographical and confessional factors. While we strive diligently to arrive at a common confession which is true to the apostolic witness to the Gospel, we must also be conscious of the importance of the church in one place making a united witness. We cannot be satisfied as long as there appears to the world about us several mutually exclusive expressions of the Christian faith.

As we engage in this process we must remember that we cannot insist on the particular formulations of an earlier age. Herbert Bouman, writing in *ACADEMY*, says, "Four hundred years after it was written, the Formula of Concord is still a grand and true witness to the Word of God. But that does not mean that the 16th century formulations have said it perfectly infallibly, unalterably, and irreformably, for all time, or that the Lutheran Church has it made and can smugly relax."²⁷

Vajta, writing on the Confession of the Reformation, says, "Only when the responsibility for evangelical proclamation made it necessary to clarify the content of the Word did confessional writings begin to appear outside the Empire. It must be kept in mind that in the beginning this did not mean mere acceptance of the Augsburg Confession. Such an idea would never have occurred to the Reformers themselves. The Augsburg Confession was regarded as a point of departure for the clarification of the religious controversy, and even in the religious discussions in Germany there was no desire to adopt the Augsburg Confession as such, but rather to accept the contents of its witness. This could naturally assume another form than that of the Augsburg Confession."²⁸

On the relation between confessionalism and ecumenism the following statement has been made: "A warning must be given against the danger of both a wrongly-conceived confessionalism and a wrongly-conceived ecumenism. In the Christian life a tension is experienced between the truth of the Gospel and the unity which the Gospel requires. A legitimate concern lies behind the development of world confessionalism — the demand that truth be swept aside in the concern for unity. A wrongly conceived ecumenism which seeks unity of witness without a clear statement of the Word of God as it must be proclaimed in the present situation, invites confusion and further fragmentation. On the other hand, a legitimate concern is equally felt by those who oppose some of the tendencies of present world confessionalism. This is wrongly conceived when it seeks to guard the truth of the Gospel by holding a confessional battle-line from the past, instead of allowing inherited confessional treasures to make their contribution to a new united confessional witness in the present.

"Four needs have to be taken into account: 1) the need for witness to be made to each region and situation in its particularity, calling for unity of witness in that area;

27. *Academy*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1977), pp. 10f.

28. Vajta, p. 176.

2) the need to seek unity in witness on the basis of a clear statement of the Word of God; 3) the need to reveal the 'catholicity' of the church by witnessing to Christ's power to transcend all regional and cultural divisions; 4) the need for churches to receive correction from each other, under the Gospel, as they seek to fulfil their missionary tasks."²⁹

In an address to the LWF Executive Committee in Belgrade in 1966, Franklin Clark Fry, speaking on "Where we Stand in the Ecumenical Movement," put the tension we are speaking of this way, "The N.T. speaks of three absolutes, if I read it correctly, absolutes, that is, in regard to the Church: one is the absolute of the church of unity, one is the absolute of truth, the third is the absolute of love. The difficulty is to keep these in proper tension. It is very easy so to stress the unity absolute as to slough off or slur over the absolute of truth. We Lutherans over the centuries have triumphantly demonstrated that it is possible to emphasize the absoluteness of truth to the utter disregard of the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ. Both are evil and both are wrong. It is a painful thing to keep truth and unity in tension . . . It is sinful for us as Christians not to act as emphatically on our agreements as we act on our disagreements. Over the centuries we Lutherans have tended to emphasize our distinctiveness . . .

"I would draw your attention to the fact that this functional side of unity rests on a confession of the givenness of unity. Unity is a gift of God and for me to fail to exercise to the ultimate which I have with my brother . . . and to exercise myself to stretch it is to show a lack of appreciation to God who gave the unity.

"And one big reason why we need to exercise the unity that is common amongst us, that already exists, is precisely for the confession and defence of our faith. And I warn that those who do not prosecute the cause of unity to the ultimate limit of their consciences may be contributing to an increased danger for the survival of faith. We are playing with fire when we play with our trivialities in these days."³⁰

If you assume that I quote Dr. Fry at length because I agree with him, you are right.

In conclusion, permit me to speak a few words of hope and joy. Our world may seem to be far more complicated than earlier ages but it is still God's world and we are, therefore, obligated to be faithful in the age to which He has called us. This is not a time for panic. The problems we face are too large for us; they are not too large for God's Spirit at work in His Church. Our devotion to Jesus Christ and His mission to the world should compel us to separate from our thinking the many trivial things which have hindered us from seeking the unity of Christ's people. We need to be Lutherans in the finest sense, i.e., in a catholic sense; we need to hold, without apology, to the truth which God has given us. Together with that loyalty to the truth we must keep before us the goal of the oneness of all of Christ's people and strive for it with all our hearts and minds. The road, in our kind of world, is surely uphill all the way but if we truly want that for which we pray according to God's will, we know that He will bring it about. "This is most certainly true!"

29. *The Missionary Task of the Church — Theological Reflections*, Bulletin of the Division of Studies of the World Council of Churches, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1971).

30. Manuscript in the possession of the writer.